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ABSTRACT

When writing, few students have any concept that word placement affects the content of their writing. They seldom rework their papers at the sentence level in order to assure that their grammar reflects and enhances their content. Recognizing the relationship of grammar to meaning, composition researchers are reasserting the place of grammar in the teaching of writing. One helpful exercise is to show students how professional writers make grammar work to enhance meaning. Exploring the grammar of Gretel Erlich's "Wyoming: The Solace of Open Spaces," students learn the importance of syntactic choices to making meaning. For example, topography of the land is mirrored in the word placement in a sentence. A paragraph images the landscape with its grammar, binding the individual components together into a whole, the sum of the parts of the description much larger than the parts themselves. Teaching stylistic grammar can be an integral part of the composition class. Because students analyze grammatical constructions in context, they learn how syntactical choices enhance content, making meaning. They make meaning of grammar, understanding its significance. (Contains six references.) (CR)

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Teaching the Topography of Gretel Ehrlich's Grammar

Donna A. Gessell

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Teaching the Topography of Gretel Ehrlich's Grammar*

Students in our composition classes often do not enjoy reading and writing and do not read and write. As a result, they lack the experience to understand how language works, particularly at the word level. Thus, when writing, few have any concept that word placement affects the content of their writing. Instead, as they are writing, students often throw down, as quickly as possible, whatever words come to mind wherever they land on the page.

The result is unfortunate. Like Milton's Satan in Paradise Lost, who worshipping his own thought spawns Sin, students often are in love with their own thoughts exactly as they originally form them. Like Milton's Satan, they do not consider the consequences of holding onto these spontaneously erupting ideas, keeping the wording exactly as it was when it first sprang forth, no matter how unformed or monstrous. Like Satan, they unleash their unexamined ideas on the world with little thought as to consequence. And, like Satan, their convoluted language produces writing that is self-reflexive, more writer-based than reader-based. Their "tortured prose" fails to make the meaning they

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* This paper was origininally delivered by Donna A. Gessell, Assistant Professor of English at North Georgia College & State University, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Phoenix, Arizona on March 14, 1997.

intended and, therefore, fails to communicate to the reader. Despite this "Sin," students seldom rework their papers at the sentence level in order to assure that their grammar reflects and enhances their content.

So how do we sensitize students to how language works to make meaning at the sentence and word level? How do we make students aware of what I define as grammar, that is "the relational principles among ideas, among things?"

Recognizing the relationship of grammar to meaning, composition researchers are reasserting the place of grammar in the teaching of writing. Recent texts such as Suan Hunter and Ray Wallace's The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction: Past, Present, and Future and Rei Noguchi's Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities have questioned older methods of teaching grammar, arguing that grammar should not be taught in isolation, as an end in itself. Teachers are shifting from "drill and kill" instruction to applied grammar. Students now learn the implications of grammatical choices by evaluating them inductively and deductively.

One of the exercises I have found helpful is to show them how professional writers make grammar work to enhance meaning. One such writer is Gretel Ehrlich. Exploring the grammar of her "Wyoming: The Solace of Open Spaces," students learn the importance of syntactic choices to making meaning.

Ehrlich's grammatical strategies may at first be indiscernible to students, who may not be aware at all of what we mean by the term "grammatical strategies." Many have had limited or no experience with any formalized grammar training, products of the educational trend of the last fifty years to ignore grammar instruction. The result of ignoring grammar instruction for two generations now is that our students haye little or no idea of how individual words work together to make meaning.

Most students probably do not have formal competence in grammar--that is, most lack any knowledge of grammar terminology. However, they can develop a rhetorical competence in achieving stylistic and formal fluency by understanding how grammar works to form relationships. In practice, because of the unevenness of our student's training in grammar, first we must teach students what to look for when linking grammar to rhetoric and style. We do not need to teach a lot of technical terms, but a common vocabulary aids in any instruction.

Here is a beginning list of grammatical choices that affect rhetoric and logic:

Grammatical Construction	**Rhetorical Effect**
Fronting	slows reading
Prepositional Phrase	slows reading, delays action, sets context for sentence
Repetition	emphasis
-- single word	

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-- phrase type

-- sentence type

Passive Voice	passiveness--acted upon
Dash	separation
Participial Phrase (-ing)	expansiveness
Monosyllabic Words	bold emphasis
End Focus	position of most importance

This list is not exhaustive. It is a starting point. Like so much else of what we do in composition instruction, it is a tool, part of the host of rhetorical strategies we encourage our students to adopt to become more experienced writers. My students and I generated the list inductively. From writing samples, we identified the grammatical construction and then discussed its rhetorical effect. I added my grammatical expertise by supplying necessary terminology to describe the constructions.

Now let's look at how Ehrlich's use of some of these grammatical constructions affects her prose. These last five paragraphs of her essay "The Solace of Open Spaces" are from the essay which is the first chapter of her book with the same name:

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Gretel Ehrlich Wyoming: The Solace of Open Spaces

After the brief lushness of summer, the sun moves south. The range grass is brown. Livestock has been trailed back down from the mountains. Waterholes begin to frost over at night. Last fall Martin asked me to accompany him on a pack trip. With five horses, we followed a river into the mountains behind the tiny Wyoming town of Meeteetse. Groves of aspen, red and orange, gave off a light that made us look toasted. Our hunting camp was so high that clouds skidded across our foreheads, then slowed to sail out across the warm valleys. Except for a bull moose who wandered into our camp and mistook our black gelding for a rival, we shot at nothing.

One of our evening entertainments was to watch the night sky. My dog, who also came on the trip, a dingo bred to herd sheep, is so used to the silence and empty skies that when an airplane flies over he always looks up and eyes the distant intruder quizzically. The sky, lately, seems to be much more crowded than it used to be. Satellites make their silent passes in the dark with great regularity. We counted eighteen in one hour's viewing. How odd to think that while they circumnavigated the planet, Martin and I had moved only six miles into our local wilderness, and had seen no other human for the two weeks we stayed there.

At night, by moonlight, the land is whittled to slivers—a ridge, a river, a strip of grassland stretching to the mountains, then the huge sky. One morning a full moon was setting in the west just as the sun was rising. I felt precariously balanced between the two as I loped across a meadow. For a moment, I could believe that the stars, which were still visible, work like cooper's bands, holding everything above Wyoming together.

Space has a spiritual equivalent and can heal what is divided and burdensome in us. My grandchildren will probably use space shuttles for a honeymoon trip or to recover from heart attacks, but closer to home we might also learn how to carry space inside ourselves in the effortless way we carry our skins. Space represents sanity, not a life purified, dull, or "spaced out" but one that might accommodate intelligently any idea or situation.

From the clayey soil of northern Wyoming is mined bentonite, which is used as a filler in candy, gum, and lipstick. We Americans are great on fillers, as if what we have, what we are, is not enough. We have a cultural tendency toward denial, but, being affluent, we strangle ourselves with what we can buy. We have only to look at the houses we build to see how we build *against* space, the way we drink against pain and loneliness. We fill up space as if it were a pie shell, with things whose opacity further obstructs our ability to see what is already there.

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Ehrlich wrote the series of essays that make up the book between 1979 and 1984. They detail her need to find solace after her lover died, slowly and painfully. This particular essay is often anthologized in freshman readers under the title "Wyoming: The Solace of Open Spaces."

An open space on the page separates the section I have excerpted from the rest of the chapter. You will notice that within this section there is another dividing open space. It separates the description of the physical environment from that of her inner environment. There is a corresponding change in the grammar she uses in the two sections.

The grammar of these first three paragraphs mirrors the open spaces of Wyoming's landscape. Like the Wyoming topography, it is stark, open, and expansive. Contrary to what one might expect, it is this starkness, this openness, this expansiveness that supplies the consolation she seeks. The grammar that she writes in this section mirrors that external environment she finds so consoling. At the same time, the grammar places her within the environment.

For instance, the third paragraph opens with the sentence, "At night, by moonlight, the land is whittled to slivers--a ridge, a river, a strip of grassland stretching to the mountains, then the huge sky." The use of the two prepositional phrases, "At night, by moonlight," and their placement at the beginning of the sentence--that is, fronting them--slow the reader,

emphasizing and reemphasizing the night setting through repetition. It is not only "at night," but "by moonlight." Furthermore, the transforming effects on the land by the night and the moonlight are reinforced by Ehrlich's use of the passive voice: "The land is whittled" signals the passivity of the land under the night and moonlight. Just as "the land is whittled into slivers," so is the list of appositives set off by the dash--itself resembling a whittled piece.

Ehrlich lists the whittled pieces: "a ridge, a river, a strip," their ability to impose boundaries left intact, the three separated by commas, not conjunctions. The set of terms "A ridge, a river" with its repetition of phrase construction sets up the expectation of only "a strip," but Ehrlich dashes that expectation by lengthening the strip into the phrase "a strip of grassland stretching to the mountains." The phrase is widened with its prepositional and participial phrases. Wider than the two phrases that precede it, the phrase mirrors the topography of the stretching grasslands itself.

Finally, "then the huge sky" ends the sentence. The words are monosyllabic; forceful. "Then" introduces the phrase, with no conjunction to separate it from the continuum Ehrlich builds of grasslands, mountains, and sky. Instead "the huge sky" completes the description by emphasizing the importance of the hugeness of the sky with the phrase's final position in the sentence. What was once a list of whittled pieces becomes an

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expansive continuum ending in the broad Wyoming sky. The topography of the land is mirrored in the word placement in the sentence. The placement of the words itself transmits meaning.

The rest of this paragraph also images the landscape with its grammar, binding the individual components together into a whole, the sum of the parts of the description much larger than the parts themselves. Ehrlich continues, after setting the scene of the land "whittled to slivers" and connecting it with the expansive "huge sky," to describe the effects of that sky and her place in relation to it

> One morning a full moon was setting in the west just as the sun was rising. I felt precariously balanced between the two as I loped across a meadow. For a moment, I could believe that the stars, which were visible, work like cooper's bands, holding everything above Wyoming together.

These three sentences band the fragmented, earth-bound individual to the cosmic whole. How do they work? The first works to establish a strong image on paper. Just as the moon sets on one side of the horizon and the sun rises on the other, so does the syntax of the sentence span the page, opposing "setting" and "rising" in the two parts of the sentence. As in the first example, an introductory adverbial phrase, "One morning" slows the reader down and sets the context for the sentence. Likewise, the present participial forms in the verb phrases "was setting"

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and "was rising" show the expansiveness of the scene Ehrlich is describing. The two verb phrases set up a balance, despite the fact "in the west" has no parallel "in the east." Its omission suggests Ehrlich's tentative orientation. There is no "I" in this sentence, even though she is central in the landscape.

Moreover, the next sentence mirrors how "precariously balance[d]" Ehrlich feels in the environment: "I felt precariously balanced between the two as I loped across a meadow. The "as" unites two clauses, which themselves precariously balance their subject, verb, and prepositional phrase. The length of the first part, with the added element "precariously balanced" is balanced by the strength of the end focus of the second. The sentence itself precariously balances the two "I"s. The meaning Ehrlich's grammar makes is that she herself is in a precarious balance at this moment in this environment.

The moment expands in the final sentence of the paragraph that makes stars into cooper's bands, "holding everything above Wyoming together." Just as the stars hold the skies together, she holds the scene in this sentence together by banding together a series of phrases, with the monosyllabic verb "work" in the central position, suggesting the effort needed to hold all in place.

This paragraph works rhetorically to move the reader from the land to the sky to the speaker and then back to the land, uniting all three--land, sky, and speaker--into one grand whole.

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The grammar, continually balancing the elements, reinforces the unity of the sky and the land--the open spaces. It entails the solace that Ehrlich seeks. However, the unity of the topography, apparent in her thoughts and syntax, remains beyond her grasp.

The unity is not lasting--not yet. Ehrlich has come to the open spaces to find solace. Although her grammar suggests that she has begun to see her place in the openness, her inner self is still a complicated jumble. That internal chaos is evident in the last two paragraphs. Ehrlich interrupts the movement started in the first three paragraphs by a break in the text. Just when "the stars work like cooper's bands, holding everything above Wyoming together," the idea falls apart. Ehrlich stops describing the external environment, moving to the internal one. The movement in the first three paragraphs has been from summer through winter; the movement here is to internal discontent. The movement from sunlight through evening and night stops when dawn begins. Instead of a new day, Ehrlich moves us into the inner darkness of ourselves.

The last examples I want discuss with you are these last two paragraphs. How do they reinforce their message, which is so different from the preceding ones, with their grammatical constructions? The syntax switches. Some of the ways grammar making meaning include:

--The speaker shifts from first person to third, suggesting that Ehrlich no longer wants to focus on her own

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experience. Of the five sentences in paragraph five, four begin with "We," emphasizing the shift to the focus on the universal, at least in the U.S., experience.

--No longer is Ehrlich fronting, which moves the thought more quickly. She is no longer exploring the unknown environment, but rapidly cataloging the interior environment.

--Likewise, she uses multi-syllabic words, which also speeds up the flow. The Latinate word choice reinforces the complication she describes.

--Her sentence structure is now compounded, and the longer sentences and more involved sentence structure mirrors the clutter "filler" she describes.

Teaching stylistic grammar can be an integral part of the composition class, and it does not necessarily have to be painful. Because students analyze grammatical constructions in context, they learn how syntactical choices enhance content, making meaning. They make meaning of grammar, understanding its significance.

This exercise is not meant to be an end in itself. Students need to transfer what they have learned from analyzing Ehrlich's writing to their own writing. They must learn how to formulate their own words, to generate their own ideas, and to create their own topographies. In the process, though, they must learn to give up their original words, avoiding Satan's mistake of falling in love with their own ideas as they form them.

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